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ABSTRACT

To most settlers in rural North Dakota, the community was the universe, and the rural school served as a community center. The Christmas program was a universal favorite in rural schools, but it was only one of several programs for the public. Local customs, ethnic backgrounds, and a particular teacher's fondness for a holiday or season gave individual schools some unique programs. School picnics were a feature of the last day of school in many rural communities, and basket socials were a favorite form of social entertainment and fund raising. In addition to school functions that attracted the community members, the country school served as a meeting place for a variety of gatherings unrelated to the school. Dances were a favorite form of community entertainment held at the school. Political parties and farm organizations also met there. Religious services were common in the schools in the years before various denominations had constructed their own churches. Although almost all of the country schools had been eliminated by the 1960s, the sense of community in many of those old rural school districts remains alive, part of the country school legacy. (Author/CM)

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COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY:

Humanities on the Frontier

Rural Schools as Community Centers in North Dakota

A Country School Legacy Essay

by

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Glenburn, North Dakota

1981

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COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY: HUMANITIES ON THE FRONTIER

The Mountain Plains Library Association is pleased to be involved in this project documenting the country school experience. Funding of this project from the National Endowment for the Humanities, cost sharing and other contributions enabled us all to work with the several state-based Humanities Committees as well as many other state and local libraries, agencies and interested citizens. We are deeply impressed not only by the enthusiasm for this work by all concerned but by the wealth of experience brought to bear in focusing attention on—and recapturing—this important part of history, and how we got here. This project seems to identify many of the roots and "character formation" of our social, political and economic institutions in the West.

Already the main Project objective seems to be met, stimulating library usage and increasing circulation of historical and humanities materials in this region. Public interest is rising in regional, state and local history. Oral history programs are increasing with greater public participation. The study of genealogy—and the search for this information—is causing much interest in consulting—and preserving—historical materials. What has been started here will not end with this project. The immediate results will tour the entire region and be available for any who wish the program, film, and exhibit. There will be more discussion of—and action on—the issues involving the humanities and public policies, past and present. The Mountain Plains Library Association is proud to be a partner in this work, the Country School Legacy, and its contribution to understanding humanities on the frontier.

Joseph J. Anderson
Nevada State Librarian
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RURAL SCHOOLS AS

COMMUNITY CENTERS IN NORTH DAKOTA

The rural school in North Dakota served as a community center from its very inception. The school was, in fact, the product of community effort because people met to decide where to locate it, how to build it, and to select a board of local citizens to manage it.

In early North Dakota communities were small geographically. Because transportation was limited to horses or undependable automobiles, small communities of only a few miles in radius developed to serve the local residents' needs. A small town provided the relatively simple material requirements for the immediate rural area. Local churches reflected the religious denominations of area settlers, and a nearby rural school educated the children.

To most settlers in rural North Dakota the community was, as far as they were concerned, the universe. Community life was relatively simple,

but its cultural importance was enormous. The community originally supplied education that was later transferred to schools. Children got vocational training from parents; communities provided recreation in the form of local baseball teams or in the games and activities that accompanied picnics and other gatherings. The home and church were responsible for character education. Everyone knew everyone else; there was no history of the community except as it was being made. Within the confines of these small communities the school pursued the task assigned to it: to make children literate.

The school's primary responsibility was education, but its convenient location made it a natural gathering place for community functions. Because community life was vital to the individuals who comprised it, the school's role as a community center rivaled its pedagogic value.

Progressive educator John Dewey placed great emphasis upon getting the school to become a social center for the community. His ideas meshed with the personal experience that led Laura Bassett and Alice Smith to urge rural teachers to get the school tied to the community. "Participation on the part of the community in your school," they wrote in their fine little volume, Helpful Hints For The Rural Teacher, "is most desirable. It is the keystone of success." They included an entire chapter of advice for the rural school hostess in which they suggested that the new teacher encourage the formation of a community club and offer the school as a meeting place. "But let the school part be subordinate," they warned. "If you are wise, while you may still be the directing power in this new movement, you will not appear to be such, but will tactfully let the community feel its ability and responsibility in the matter."[1]

The school served as a community center in two respects: it offered school programs, and it provided a meeting place for gatherings not related

to the school. Community activities at the school benefitted local educational efforts by helping to engender popular support for education and to create an awareness of the school's needs. In return the school served as a social center and offered entertainment.

Many schools offered a variety of entertaining programs, none more popular than the Christmas program. The festive highlight of the year in many localities, the Christmas program drew everyone. Parents beamed as their children performed and other local residents witnessed what was in most schools a mainly secular program of plays, songs, poems and the inevitable arrival of Santa at the conclusion of the affair. The spirit of the season, perhaps, brought community camaraderie to its zenith at the Christmas program. Even bitter December weather did not deter the audience from attending. At Oscar Olum's 1914 Christmas program, every person in the community crowded into the school to view the students' efforts despite the -40° temperature. Occasionally blizzards on the evening of the program forced everyone to stay at the school overnight. At one school where this occurred, the program was performed a second time. Children wrapped coats about themselves and went to sleep on the floor; adults conversed or played cards the night through and returned home the next day.[2]

The community expected an elaborate Christmas program, and the teacher usually saw that they got one. Preparation for the annual event began as early as October in some schools, though that was unusually early. In most schools, however, practise of Christmas songs would begin immediately after Thanksgiving and rehersals of plays, poems, and other recitations would gradually take up more time until regular instruction actually stopped altogether for the last few days before the program. Every child had some

part in addition to group singing. Mothers helped if extra recitation was needed at home. By the time the long-awaited program arrived, even the youngest and shyest children could give a glib rendition of their assigned lines. No effort was spared to make the program a success. As one former student recalls:

> The Christmas program was probably the biggest event of the year. Everyone practiced for weeks to get the little skits, monologs, poems, and songs memorized. Program practice meant getting away from the hum-drum of regular lessons so it was a great treat. The school house was decorated with red and green streamers and hand-colored pictures with a Christmas theme.
>
> The stage had to be made and seating arranged. Each mother would furnish one or two white sheets for stage curtains and these were also dividers to make a dressing room on each side. At the program I'm sure the mothers had to check to see who had the whitest sheets. Usually they were finger-marked before the program started and eyes peeked from between them during the program. Planks were laid across the seats to make room for the parents, grandparents, and neighbors. Everyone in the community went to the Christmas program.
>
> The schoolhouse looked simply dazzling in the light of the gas lanterns. The tree was decorated with paper chains, popcorn, and tinsel and it had a star on the top. Sometimes the teacher would donate some colored glass balls. Little snap candle holders held the tiny candles upright on the tree to complete the decoration. These candles were seldom lit because of the fire hazard, but they were pretty anyway, and the pine smell filled the room.
>
> After we had all spoken our "pieces" and sang our songs, someone passed out the packages under the tree. Sometimes a wrinkled, sagging Santa did the honors and all the little children would scream and cry. We drew names to see who would buy each one a gift. The cost was usually under 50 cents. We always looked forward to the teacher's gift for us. There were sacks of nuts and candy for all the children and an apple for each grown-up. Then we had a sack lunch which the mothers prepared. The grown-ups had coffee out of tin cups that were really hot to touch. The big boys always blew up their sacks and popped them in some girl's ear after they had eaten their lunch.
>
> Then the curtains were taken down and the desks were pushed back and everybody sang and played the games like "Farmer in the Dell" and "Skip to My Lou". Little tots would go to sleep and Mama would make a bed for them on top of a bunch of coats on a desk top. This kept on until everyone was hoarse from singing and very tired. We'd all bundle up and go home where I'd dream the whole evening over again in my sleep.[3]

The Christmas program was a universal favorite in rural schools, but it was only one of several programs for the public. Local customs, ethnic

backgrounds, and a particular teacher's fondness for a holiday or season gave individual schools some unique programs. At one Wells County school, for example, a child was selected to take charge of an Easter program to which only mothers were invited.[4] Pleasant Valley School in Bottineau County had a traditional Fall program and basket social after harvest was completed.[5]

At the Carkuff School in Mountrail County the Young Citizen's League presented two programs each year: one for the parents and another elaborate program with skits, recitations, readings and special music for the public. This was a popular program throughout the 1930's.[6]

The Missouri Ridge School near Williston held spelldowns and competition in solving arithmetic problems for the public. These events were sometimes accompanied with box or pie socials. Spelldowns were so popular in Nelson County in 1896 that County Superintendent C. A. Hall, noting that the competition was "conducted with all the old time vigor of the eastern New England School," began attending the events to learn what parents and other community people thought of the educational system.[7]

Other schools staged programs that became popular and customary in various areas. Halloween, Valentines Day, Memorial Day, Mother's Day, Arbor Day, Parents Day, and Washington's birthday were all celebrated in different schools with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

At Enid Bern's school in Hettinger County, May Fetes--an unusual program in rural North Dakota--were held with considerable pageantry. The event was performed in the traditional manner with a Queen leading a costumed procession of medieval court jesters, page boys, Queen's attendants, and ladies in waiting. A play such as "Robin Hood and His Merry Men," and songs were performed on an outdoor stage. The Queen of May was crowned followed by the Maypole dance and recessional.[8]

School picnics were a feature of the last day of school in many rural communities. Pot luck dinners provided by neighborhood women, sack races, horse shoes, and games of all sorts celebrated the return of warm weather and, for children, the end of the school term.

Basket socials were a favorite form of social entertainment and fund raising in rural communities. Often held in conjunction with some school program, these raised funds for the school or for needy neighbors in economic distress. At these gatherings a box or basket containing food for two people was prepared by each woman of the community. The men would bid for the priviledge of consuming the contents of the basket in the company of the preparer, a woman whose identity was, theoretically at least, unknown. In practise most married men were able to discern the container prepared by their wives and, out of a sense of decorum, would bid a sufficient amount to purchase that basket.

The popularity of this event, however, lay in the potential for economic exploitation of the romantic suitor or husband. Humor abounded when it became apparent that a young man was apparently prepared to spend a considerable sum to earn the right to share lunch with the preparer of a basket whom the residents of a small community could easily deduce belonged to his wife or girlfriend. Other men would take the risk of bidding against the amorous man, gambling that they could drive his bid higher. The eligible young school teacher's basket often secured the highest bid.

As a social activity, the basket socials throw rural community life into relief better than many other functions. They were entertaining, and therefore popular, only because the community was so small and its inhabitants so well known to each other that the basket's anonymity was merely a fiction.

The entertainment of the game lay not so much in eating lunch with a mystery partner as it did in detecting which husband was jealous enough to let another man force up his bid. In these respects the basket socials not only served to raise money for some community use, they also furnished information for gossip. Basket socials were most popular in newly settled areas where age differences were not great and where men outnumbered women.

In addition to school functions that attracted the community members, the country school served as a meeting place for a variety of gatherings that were unrelated to the school. Community clubs met at the school in localities that were enterprising enough to form an association. At the Brooklyn Consolidated School near Wheelock a community club met one Friday of each month for a social evening. The business meeting always preceded an entertaining program followed by a pot luck dinner. Parents usually provided the program in the form of a debate, skit or play. Everyone in the community came to the meetings, which were the social highlight of the month. There were always some members who could furnish music with violin, accordian or piano to entertain or to accompany group singing.[9]

The community clubs in rural schools resembled the parent teacher organizations that operated in town schools. Surviving records of the Twin Butte Community Club in Williams County offer a detailed look at the functions and activities of the rural community clubs and their relationship to the school. Membership in the club was open to those age 14 and older for 25 cents annually. Membership entitled one to participate in the business meetings and hold office and practically mandated service on one of many committees that kept the club going financially and designed the program for each meeting. Programs were elaborate and imaginative involving a

mixture of adult participation and entertainment by school children. A typical program included community singing, two or three readings--generally humorous or inspirational pieces--accordian and violin solos, and an address by a member who had news of community interest to impart.[10]

Debates were very popular and were held frequently. Topics debated include: "Resolved; that the Farm Woman Works Harder and has less Recreation than the Farm Man" (resolved in the affirmative by a panel of three judges), or "Resolved: that the Soldier Serves His Country More than a Farmer" (decided in the negative). The debate topics generally revolved around social questions of local interest and avoided weighty political or philosophical matters.

The club sponsored a local baseball team that played against other area teams at picnics and on summer holidays. Picnics were always accompanied by a wide range of organized outdoor activities, including horseshoes, croquet, and relays ad sprints in boys, girls, men and women categories.

During the 1930's the club became very active despite the depression and the miniscule treasury. In December, 1936, the balance in the treasury fell to $4.03, and it was decided to perform a play to raise money by selling tickets. In February, 1937, the four-act play "Let Toby Do It," featuring a piano solo between each act, was performed before eighty people in the Twin Butte School. The price of each ticket is not mentioned, but total ticket receipts for the play were $7.50. By the early 1940's the club had returned to relative prosperity, enabling the group to pay $4.54 to tune the school piano.

The records demonstrate that the Twin Butte club's welfare was closely tied to the school. As in most rural areas, the school was more than a convenient meeting place. It was a source of entertainment and a focus of community social life.

Dances were a favorite form of community entertainment frequently held at the school. Desks were stacked by the wall and the school organ or piano, sometimes supplemented by a local violin or accordian player, was used for music. The school usually provided room for no more than two square dance sets, but that was generally sufficient for the size of the crowd. If the crowd was young, dances often continued until the early morning hours following a midnight lunch. Many rural school teachers recall that the exertions of the dance left them drowsy at school the next day to the delight of older pupils who understood and were quick to exploit the teacher's handicap.[11]

Political parties and farm organizations also met at the country school. These meetings, unlike the social gatherings, appealed to a certain group and rarely attracted the entire community.

The Nonpartisan League, a progressive farm oriented political movement that flourished from 1916 to 1924, occasionally used the country schools to hold organizing meetings. A movement that excited strong opinions, pro and con, the League and its opponents waged a bitter battle that divided some communities into cliques. That division naturally extended into the school itself where children of parents who favored one faction warred with those who favored another. On election day the school was usually the polling place, where political debates were eventually settled.[12]

Farmers Union local organizations often held their regular monthly meetings in the school. Although the farm organization was committed to specific goals and farm policies, their meetings included a program and a social evening resembling those of the community clubs. People attended the meetings who were not particularly involved in the farm organization's activities.[13]

Religious services were common in the schools in the early years before various denominations had constructed their own church. Weddings and baptisms were conducted in some early schools. The larger denominations such as the Catholics and Lutherans were generally quick to construct a church in their community, but the smaller groups, Baptists, Congregational and others used the school until they could accrue sufficient funds to construct their own building. Evangelists also occasionally used the school building or grounds for revival meetings.[14]

A wide variety of other non-social meetings were held at the country school. The Wheat Growers Association, cooperative organization meetings, Homemakers lessons, County Agent demonstrations or any meeting of community interest that required a meeting place was likely to be held at the school.

The primary reason that the country school was such a successful community center was because it was the only place that was open to everyone. All members of the community, regardless of their religious or political affiliation, met on the school's neutral ground. In the process they established a community identity. A number of developments--easier transportation, the decline in rural population, the pressure to consolidate schools--eliminated nearly all the country schools by the 1960's. But the sense of community in many of those old rural school districts remains alive, not strong, but extant, part of the country school legacy.

NOTES

[1]Laura Bassett and Alice Smith, Helpful Hints for the Rural Teacher (Valley City, N.D.: Bassett and Smith, 1924), p. 59.

[2]Letter from Nancy Heinzer, Bismarck, N.D., Jan. 30, 1981.
Letter from Florence Newsom, Hurdsfield, N.D. Nov. 11, 1980.
Interview with Oscar Olum, Towner, N.D. Jan. 6, 1981.

[3]Copy of a letter written by Mrs. Jalmer Fagerland, Wildrose, N.D.

[4]Letter from Florence Newsom, Hurdsfield, N.D. Nov. 11, 1980.

[5]Letter from Roy Olson, Willow City, N.D. Feb. 25, 1981.

[6]Letter from Hazel Satterwaite Evans, New Town, N.D. Feb. 21, 1981.

[7]Letter from Lawrence Poe, Williston, N.D. Feb. 15, 1981.
Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1986, Public Documents of North Dakota, p. 269.

[8]Marie Mynster Feidler, In Retrospect: Recollections of Retired Teachers (Grand Forks, N.D.: North Dakota Retired Teachers Assoc., 1976), p. 152.

[9]Interview with Alida Siverson, Williston, ND., Jan 14, 1981.

[10]Twin Butte Community Club Record Book, 1923-1944. Private Collection.

[11]Interviews with Anne Lassey, Williston, N.D. Jan. 14, 1981, and with Alida Siverson, Williston, N.D. Jan. 14, 1981

[12]Letter from Roy Olson, Willow City, N.D., Feb. 1981.

[13]Interview with Dennis Stromme, Zahl, N.D. Jan. 15, 1981. Letter from Cinthia Haberstroh, Lisbon, N.D. Jan 22, 1981.

[14]Interview with Louise Jevne, Lansford, N.D. Nov. 20, 1980.
Interview with Dennis Stromme, Zahl, N.D., Jan 15, 1981.